

A meaningful life

BY RUKMINI SHEKHAR

I don't believe that there was ever a defining moment when I changed tracks from seeking to live to seeking to live *meaningfully*. For that's what the "path" really meant to me. "Meaning" indicated that I intentionally and consciously sought a deeper and more profound significance to everything in my life and to keep a thread of interdependence and connectedness with all my life aspects – my work which did not clash with my personal and social politics, my relationships, the food I ate, the clothes I wore, the aesthetic sensibility, the personal audit that I imposed on myself, and the constant attempt to be aware of my evolution from the gross to the subtle. Every fine tuning is a tiny little triumph which gives me joy unbounded, and a feeling of internal lightness that is impossible to describe.

Turning vegetarian, for me, was a significant and deeply considered step in the fine tuning process. Brought up in a non-vegetarian family that pretty much ate everything and having grown up with tastes that I relished, over the years, I began to see that the meat I was putting into my belly carried the cry of a fear-stricken animal. It couldn't understand the meaning of the blade that it saw in that confounded moment, why it was transported over miles and miles without water or food, why it was made to stand in cramped cages without an inch to rest its aching legs, why it was pumped with strange chemicals that made it fat, why it was no longer



allowed to graze on the lovely juicy grass that grew less and less as multinational companies grew acres and acres of crops for their agribusiness. It was not the fear of cholesterol or colon cancer that made me push away that dish of flesh, it was a commitment to karuna. I could no longer isolate the taste of the few inches of my tongue from that larger picture of fear and pain.

You can call me a fourth wave feminist who has now taken back the kitchen from the vacuum created by women who abandoned it for work outside the home. My kitchen is the nucleus of my well-being, and a symbol of my protest against corporatised and capitalistic food. Granted that I cannot go back to the earthen stove given that I live in an apartment, but I refuse to nuke my food or acquire more food gizmos, have thrown out the toxic aluminium pots and the stylish Teflon non-stick pans, and now watch with delight as the food gently simmers in the uneven handmade healthy iron woks and pots made by our traditionally wise lohawalas. I have waged war against processed foods that still have a way of sneaking into everything that you pick up from a shop shelf. I am a mad eater of vegetables, fruits, seeds, dry fruits, a variety of whole grains, honey and jaggery.

Ahimsa has not permeated my life entirely for I still give in to leather, silk and the automobile. But I try to shun all things synthetic and minimise the use of plastic. To be plastic free, you have to get rid of paints,

computers, refrigerators, televisions, telephones, calculators, buckets, mobile phones and music systems, just to name a few oil / petroleum-based objects. Not always possible in urban living. Fortunately for us in India, we still have a very sensible repair culture and every conceivable type of repairer whom I seek out for repairing bags, clothes, sheets, towels, shoes, quilts, mobiles, picture frames and electronic gadgets before finally consigning them to the dustbin. For every object bears the costs of electricity, water, non-renewable fossil fuels, and possibly the unrelenting toil of an underpaid, undernourished worker who is also probably ten years old. I am indebted for the school time that I have snatched away from him or her. I am a repairer possessed. I do not claim to be spartan or ascetic, but do find joy in giving away things that I have not used for at least a year.

Walking is my ultimate joy as is sharing time, food and space with friends. My lifestyle changes over the years include a profound respect for gentle and intelligent health systems like yoga, naturopathy and Ayurveda, and a careful and cynical scrutiny of modern medicine and its allied industries. As I walk every evening, breathing, introspecting or talking to my companion, "the path" opens up to me bringing me health, the earth and peace. The mysteries of the path are out there forever beckoning, forever offering delightful secrets for exploration. But the starting point is right there within you. ☺

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